



Opinion

Asking the right questions, doing the right tests at Coakley

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Until fairly recently, America's attitude toward the environment was best summed up by writer H.L. Mencken, the sage of Baltimore, who observed: "Nature is a place to throw empty beer cans on a Sunday."

For decades we treated Planet Earth like a trash can, filling our ground, air and water with deadly pollutants.

In the 1960s, Rachel Carson opened our eyes to the dangers of rampant pesticide use in "Silent Spring." Cities began to choke on air pollution, the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland burst into flames and images from Apollo 8 showed Earth as a finite and fragile body floating in space. Our nation responded with the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act and the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency, the federal agency overseeing the cleanup of the Coakley landfill.

At Coakley, we threw our waste and incinerator ash, in an unlined former gravel pit, put a cap on it to keep out the rainwater, and pretty much left it to nature to break down the chemicals over time. Contaminants of concern in the landfill identified by the EPA include 1,4-dioxane, arsenic, barium, benzene, beryllium, cadmium, chromium, DDT, lead, manganese and mercury. Recently, PFAS chemicals have also been found in tests at the landfill.

As we now understand, we cannot separate our own health from the health of the environment in which we live. So when the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services identified a pediatric cancer cluster in 2016 in Rye, Greenland, North Hampton, Portsmouth and New Castle, questions were naturally raised about whether Coakley might be a factor.

In 2014, at the direction of the EPA, responsible parties began testing for perfluorinated compounds (PFCs), chemicals that came into use in the 1950s and became ubiquitous for their valuable non-stick properties. By the 1990s, as studies began to show possible ill-health effects related to exposure to PFCs (now more commonly referred to as PFAS) use of the chemicals was discontinued but, as we are learning, they are everywhere and, because they are highly stable, they remain in the environment longer than volatile organic chemicals and bioaccumulate in animals, including humans.

The U.S. Air Force was an early tester for PFAS and found the chemicals polluting two drinking water wells at the former Pease Air Force Base and subsequent tests have also found PFAS both in testing wells and surface water around the Coakley landfill. The EPA will hold a public meeting on PFAS at Exeter High School June 25-26, the first such meeting in the country.

Because the pediatric cancer cluster was identified around the same time tests began revealing PFAS in local groundwater², and because those studying the cancer cluster chose to focus in part on Coakley, the issues have become conflated. While PFAS has been found at Coakley it's important to remember contaminants in the landfill caused it to be designated a Superfund site decades before testing for PFAS began. PFAS may be a problem at Coakley because it takes so long to break down, but it's not the only problem.

The most important action taking place right now is bedrock testing being conducted around Coakley to see if polluted groundwater is leaving the site through fissures in the bedrock and if it is, where it is going. The results of those tests are expected in 2019. We were glad to see the EPA push back on the Coakley Landfill Group's initial proposed bedrock testing plan, asking for deeper wells in a greater number of locations.

At the community meeting on Coakley last week, Assistant Mayor Cliff Lazenby announced the City Council's intention to form a working group with representatives from area towns to improve communication with the CLG. We support this idea.

It seems the right questions are being asked and the right tests conducted at the Coakley landfill. While tests are taking place we urge city officials and the CLG not to minimize the health concerns of residents living around the landfill. In the end, we continue to believe the solution will be to pipe municipal water to neighborhoods in Greenland whose wells are impacted by Coakley.